

Pittsburg State University

Pittsburg State University Digital Commons

Eva Jessye Correspondence

Eva Jessye Collection 1885-1994

2015-01-01

Letter, 1985 January 20, from Eva Jessye to Ora Williams (presumabl)

Eva Jessye

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/ejc>

Recommended Citation

Jessye, Eva, "Letter, 1985 January 20, from Eva Jessye to Ora Williams (presumabl)" (2015). *Eva Jessye Correspondence*. 237.

<https://digitalcommons.pittstate.edu/ejc/237>

This Manuscript is brought to you for free and open access by the Eva Jessye Collection 1885-1994 at Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eva Jessye Correspondence by an authorized administrator of Pittsburg State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mmccune@pittstate.edu, jmauk@pittstate.edu.

Porgy and Bess Will Soon Be 50; But Eva Jessye Will Be 90!

By ORA WILLIAMS
(Special to The Sentinel)

Miss Eva Jessye, also Dr. Eva Jessye, has dozens of titles and an equal number of talents. Harvard musicologist Eileen Southern hails her as a pioneer in the organizational movement of professional choruses. Ebony claims she is "the first Black woman to win international distinction as a choral director." Official "Ambassador of the Arts for Kansas," she is called "Guardian of the Score (Porgy and Bess)," "an impeccable musician," "a part of our history," "earth-mother incarnate," "Mother Africa," and "Dean of Black women musicians."

During the coming year, when cultural centers throughout the country will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," some attention should be paid to Miss Jessye, who will celebrate her 90th birthday in 1985.

Miss Jessye, whose choral direction helped make the opera what it is today, was picked by George Gershwin to train the chorus. She continued in that role for 30 years, thus, one reason for the appellation "Guardian of the Score." Her ability to transfer her knowledge of the experience with Black music to this production contributed to the unique quality that distinguishes "Porgy and Bess."

But, Miss Jessye likes to remind her admirers that her life did not begin with the Gershwins, or in 1935.

For years she directed a well-known choral group called The Dixie Jubilee Singers. Later, she formed a group which bore her name, the Eva Jessye Choir. They were regulars on the Major Bowes "Family" Radio Hour, the General Motors Hour, and other radio programs. They sang with Paul Robeson in "Ballad of Americans." Their appearances were legion on Black and White campuses, at patriotic functions, and on church, radio, and television programs. The Eva Jessye Choir was the official choir for the 1963 March on Washington.

One year before the opening of "Porgy and Bess," the Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein production, "Four Saints in Three Acts" needed a cast that could sell a very difficult to do and to understand opera. According to Thomson, he happened on a night club in Harlem one evening and discovered how wonderfully well Black people enunciated English; in Thomson's words, "impeccable enunciation." A Thomson biographer, Kathleen Hoover, says that Thomson was attracted primarily by "the fine projection of Negro singers. Their lack of intellectual resistance to a hermetic text and their noble dignity in acting out a religious theme came as later surprises, pure dividends."

Miss Jessye writes, "He would have Blacks do it because they would not care about the libretto, they would not question or analyze."

Thomson also would have a choir that could read music, and the Eva Jessye Choir was allegedly the only Black one in New York that could meet this requirement.

After calling an 8 a.m. rehearsal of her accomplished musicians, Jessye sat up all night slaving "over the score with its numerous changes in key, rhythm, style, etc." When the choir arrived at eight in the morning, they were able to get the work under control in one hour and a half. When Thomson, unaware of the preparatory work done, began rehearsing the choir, it "took off like a champion on a race track. It was fantastic," Jessye muses. "Thomson could hardly believe his ears. He had to exclaim, 'I never saw such note reading!'"

Although widely known as a musician who is steeped in American folk music, Miss Jessye is also a writer. She was a journalist for several Black newspapers. She has been a poet since she was seven. At 16 she was awarded a gold medal by the African Methodist Episcopal Church for composing the Centennial "Ode to African Methodism." In 1923 Robert Kerlin brought Miss Jessye's poetry to public attention when he published two of her poems in "Negro Poets and Their Poems."

The title of a series of some of her early poems, "My People: A Little Poetry and a Lot of Truth," foreshadows several distinct features of Jessye's poetry: Didacticism and rhyme. Although her subjects and styles range from racial to international events and from formal to colloquial, respectively, many of her poems are autobiographical/personal and racial. Some of Jessye's poems are very serious, a few elegaic. Others are playful and very



EVA JESSYE

witty.

Several years ago, when a nearby university omitted reference to Black jazz artists from its jazz festival, Miss Jessye submitted this poem on Count Basie:

See the easygoing Count Basie:

Hear him ripple and flow--

Pianissimo...

Accent and anticipate--

Never accelerate.

Now forte, then mezzo--

Clever and sure...

To staccato and teasingly brief--

Signature!

THE HIGHWAY

Travellers pass my door-----

Some blind with arrogance

And fixed intent

To stamp the public mind with iron tread

That they be ne'er forgot.

Yet, when the circle of their lives is spent,

Their footprints fade as shadows on the sand.

Yet others pass-----

Who ever gently tread...

Think not of self,

But kindness to dispense...

Nor make a sound to beckon for acclaim.

Yet, those who follow in their silent wake

Behold impassioned footsteps carved in stone.

VALUES

THE TIE THAT LIES ON THE
RAILROAD BED

MEANS JUST AS MUCH TO THE
WHOLE CONCERN

AS THE PLUSH COVERED SEAT
IN THE PARLOR CAR,

Love and Thanks

To God

And to You,

My Friend.

Eva Jessye

January 20
1985